The Reformed Tradition and the Local Congregation
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I fell in love with/discovered the Reformed Tradition long before I had a name for it.

Martin Camroux's initial invitation, which surprised and flattered me, was to come to Cambridge and talk about "How a local congregation can discover the Reformed Tradition in a post-modern context when people increasingly sit light to tradition and denomination." Well - what self-respecting Presbyterian could resist an expansive topic like that?

Later, he condensed it to "Reformed Theology and the Local Congregation": a little less fancy, but more manageable.

So that is what I will strive to do - talk about what I know best - the life of an American Presbyterian congregation, with a few brief forays into theology and the sociology of religion, for which I trust I can rely on your grace, with occasionally reference to the peculiarity of the religious situation in the United States, which reflects American author Phyllis Tickle's memorable image of an every-four-hundred year rummage sale - and occasionally feels like the ecclesiastical equivalent of a nuclear meltdown.

In any event I fell in love with it before I had a name for it; in fact, before I could talk.

I became a Presbyterian, and thus an heir of the Reformed Tradition when the local Presbyterian pastor heart that a new young couple in the neighborhood - my parents - had a sick infant - that would be me - and paid a visit in their home. Apparently he prayed for me and they were so taken with his kindness that they started to attend his church, and one Sunday, presented me for baptism. I do not recall the occasion, but I know that he held me in his arms, poured the waters of baptism on my head, said my name, assured my parents of the covenanted promise of God, and told the congregation seated in the pews that morning, most, if not all of them long gone now, that they were my "sponsors," my Presbyterian Godparents, told them they were responsible for helping my parents to bring me up in the "nurture and admonition of the Lord" so that one day I would come, at last, to God's eternal kingdom.

I am the pastor of a church that has a lot of young couples and consequently an abundance of babies. We celebrate the Sacrament of

Baptism on the second Sunday of every month, and baptize 12 infants, six at the 9:30 service and six more at 11:00, 120-130 per year, and at the end of each baptism ritual I invite the congregation to pray together:

"Holy God, remind us of the promises given in our own baptism and renew our trust in you. Make us strong to obey your will, and to serve you with joy; for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

And I do, every time, remember and thank God for it. It took, that baptism did. I grew up in that congregation, and it was there that a seed was planted, and it was there that I began to ask the questions that led, drove, or dragged me to my vocation 25 years later.

I loved the Reformed Tradition before I had a name for it. And even though it chose me, as it were, early on I began to chose it and claim it.

There were plenty of times when I ignored it and it ignored me. My parents were not fervent Presbyterians. In fact, "fervent Presbyterian" is kind of an oxymoron. But going to church on Sunday was part of what we did. And so it was sitting in our pew in that church that we sang - it seems now - every week:

"Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty
Early in the Morning, Our Song Shall Rise to Thee
Holy, Holy, Holy, Merciful and Mighty
God in Three Persons, blessed Trinity."

I had no idea what the second stanza was referring to when we sang:

"All the saints adore thee
Casting down their golden crowns
Around the glassy sea"

but I loved the image, and through it all began to sense something of the mystery and majesty of God.

One of our ministers, an eloquent and dramatic Texan with a voice as rich and deep as an oil well - created a Good Friday night candlelight service which raised eyebrows: candles, after all, were the purview of our Catholic neighbors; he read the accounts of the crucifixion as the candles were gradually extinguished and when in the darkness he cried out, "Eloi, Eloi, Lama Sabacthani" I was touched to the quick with the suffering and pathos.

It was the pastor who came when I was in High School who cemented the deal. His name was Leslie Van Dine and he was a decorated Army

Sergeant in World War II, who was wounded in battle and whose call to ministry came in the midst of combat. He went to college after the war and then to Yale Divinity School. I didn't know about Divinity School, but I knew about Yale. He was scholarly, undramatic, unlike his predecessor. He pretty much read his sermon - but his sermons were laced with references to books and plays and motion pictures. It never occurred to me that ministers enjoyed motion pictures and plays. He quoted *The New York Times*! My parents were entranced. His Democratic politics irritated my Republican father, but Dad couldn't help admire his literacy and his courage.

Each time he said that he didn't expect people to agree with him, but he did hope they would respect him - and they did -and I became aware of a unique way of being Christian, which included a thoughtful disagreement with the intellectual and political life of the world outside the doors of the church. I had not thought of that before. It certainly was a dramatic contrast with the way of being Christian taught at a large evangelical Baptist church I occasionally attended with chums - mainly because they sang lively songs, had food at every youth meeting and plentiful, attractive girls, none of which was true about my Presbyterian Church. But the Baptists were mainly concerned about my personal habits - smoking was sinful, so was drinking alcohol, thinking about sex was obviously bad - which for an adolescent boy was a little like trying to convince the sun not to rise, even dancing was frowned on - not a word about what was going on in the world.

What finally compelled me was my first encounter with science, Darwin and evolution. We didn't talk about it in my home, but I wasn't very old when I began to notice some problems with Biblical accounts of creation. For one thing, there are two of them, back to back and they don't agree on how things happened. In fact, they tell two fairly different stories. When I presented my observation to my Baptist chums they almost fainted. "It's true - it happened because the Bible is true, every word of it" they assured me.

So I took my new observations to Van Dine - who patiently explained that, yes, Presbyterians generally were not literalists, the Bible was true indeed, but the stories in the Bible were not always factually accurate. Evolution, many Presbyterians believe, is how it happened and it is not at all incompatible with what we believe about God.

Van Dine was also ecumenical. In our small city, he led the effort to organize a council of churches, a new idea at the time, bringing together Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran, Congregational churches. Rumor was one of his closest friends was a Rabbi with whom he enjoyed regular lunches.

He did not shy from controversy. This was a decade before the Civil Rights movement forever changed the church in the United States, but he frequently mentioned from the pulpit the injustice and racism rampant in American culture. One unforgettable incident still makes me smile. There is, or was, - I haven't heard about them for years - an organization with a name in which you should have a particular interest: The Daughters of the American Revolution, the D.A.R. It was what the title indicated: an organization for women who could document their genealogical ties to the War for Independence - the end of which we celebrate on the 4th of July, an occasion my Scottish colleague tells me he observes as a day to "lament the lost colonies." The D.A.R. was stuffy, snooty, elitist and very conservative politically. It was also openly racist. The D.A.R. owned a popular auditorium in Washington called Constitution Hall, which it rented out for public concerts and lectures: Marian Anderson was a distinguished opera star who sang with all the best companies in the world. Her agent booked Constitution Hall for a recital. But when the D.A.R. realized that an African-American, a black woman, would be singing on its stage, it cancelled the contract. It was in all the newspapers as an example of institutional racism at its very worst. Well - the Rev. Van Dine decided to talk about it from the pulpit and he got off an unforgettable line. He said the best part of the D.A.R. is "underground." The congregation went silent. There were D.A.R. members in the pews: my Aunts Peg and Inez were proud members. Some were outraged. My Dad thought it was the funniest thing he had ever heard, even though his politics would have qualified him for membership, if he were a woman. I felt proud.

So there it was: intellectual rigor, intentional worldliness, respect for other religious traditions, an open-minded trust in God; the Reformed Tradition given to me by a community of Presbyterian Christians and their pastors, who had promised years before, in my baptism, to nurture me and be my sponsors "to the end that I might confess Christ as my Lord."

My assignment did not include defining the Reformed Tradition. That has been done admirably already. But a few reflections will help me lead into the rest of my paper.

Cynthia McCall Campbell, a good friend of mine, is the President of McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago. In an address to her students at the beginning of the term, Cynthia talked about the theological tradition, Reformed-Presbyterian - in which the students would be learning, discussing, practicing, arguing in the years ahead. The Reformed Tradition, Cynthia said, is "a way of thinking rather than a set of ideas, practices in commitments rather than specific doctrines."

Her list of "the habits of Reformed Practice" included:

1. Appreciation: "We honor and think we should know about the contributions of Christians of other eras, other cultures and other traditions. Even in our more rigid and critical periods, Presbyterians have never claimed to be the only ones who will be saved or the 'one true church.' We are ecumenical because we are Presbyterian."
2. an attitude of suspicion: "Presbyterianism has always argued that both church and Christian doctrine should always be in the process of being reformed. We are self-critical; a unique attitude these days."
3. engagement with the world: "the world is where we expect to meet God and see God at work."
4. (finally) Grace and Gratitude: "It is finally all about grace, about God's freely given love for the world told in the story of the Bible and made manifest in the life and ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ." We can't earn it - we don't deserve it. All we can do is receive it gratefully and live it faithfully.

Cynthia borrowed the phrase "Grace and Gratitude" from a distinguished British theologian who ended up in the United States, taught at the University of Chicago and Union Theological Seminary - Brian Gerrish. Obviously, he didn't invent it, but he has written about it elegantly. In *Saving and Secular Faith* Gerrish writes about our Presbyterian habit of writing new creeds or confessions of faith every generation or so. "Confessions of faith are reminders. Their primary use is not to smoke out heresy, but, primarily through constant recollection, to preserve identity. The present (They prevent?) disintegration by maintaining a common language, a community of discourse, without which the fellowship would suffer group amnesia and might dissolve in a babble of discordant voices" (p. 56). Gerrish didn't intend it but he got off a pretty good description of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

Gerrish says among the good and healthy aspects of Reformed Tradition is that it resists trivialization. He told about Robert Maynard Hutchins, one of the great names in American Higher Education and President of the University of Chicago. At first he regularly attended University Chapel until the day the Dean began his sermon: "Yesterday, I was on the golf course and as I teed off I was reminded that we must follow through in life."

Hutchins never attended another service. He explained: it wasn't as if what the Dean said was not true, but, he said, he had heard such truths sufficiently often and "sometimes in a better literary framework" (p. 56).

For Brian Gerrish the Reformed Tradition is an attitude a Lutheran friend of his told him that "he could spot a Calvinist a mile off, but didn't say how he did it" (p. 84); which reminded me of that hoary observation that there is nothing so frightening as a lone Calvinist in possession of the truth.

Actually, Gerrish would say, that is not an accurate image at all.

He writes: "Keeping faith with the tradition, then, is not at all being bound by the letter of the law, it is more a matter of the company you keep, or the book you reach for first when you want to do your best thinking" (p. 84).

Gerrish is particularly helpful when he talks about pluralism, an issue that may be the most important and difficult one for the church in the future: "To say that the Christian receives saving faith through the New Testament image of Jesus need not imply that faith cannot be had in any other way, or that no other religious traditions confer salvation. Hence it does not preclude or impede open and honest interfaith dialogue, but simply states the point from which, for the Christian, that dialogue begins" (p. 101).

He does not mean a mushy reduction of Christianity to its least common denominator: "While genuine conversation is certainly inhibited by absolute and exclusive certainty, there cannot be a conversation at all if the Christian has nothing to say or no savior to confess . . . Christians will begin the dialogue convinced that what has been given to them through Jesus Christ is for all humanity. But Jesus Christ may not be humanity's sole access to it. There is no way to know that in advance, before one has listened to the other parties in the conversation" (p. 102).

One more voice: Nicholas Wolterstorff, who teaches Philosophy at Yale University and is a Reformed Christian:

"God's call to those who are Christ's followers is to participate in the life of the church and to think, feel, speak and act as Christians within the institutions and practices that we share with our fellow human beings. We are not called to go off by ourselves somewhere to set up our own economic practices, our own political institutions, our own art world, our own world of scholarship: we are called to participate within our own shared human practices and institutions" (p. 26, *The Christian Century, "How My Mind Has Changed,"* 12/1/09).

Getting even closer to this topic, you invited me to address "the current religious situation in the United States."

Phyllis Tickle likens what is happening to us to an “every-five (hundred?)-year rummage sale.” (Do you have rummage sales in Great Britain? Dreadful affairs where people bring stuff they no longer want to the church, school, fire hall - whoever is sponsoring it - where it is sorted, priced, put on display and other people come and buy it.) Rummage Sale means getting rid of whatever has outlived its usefulness and beginning again, leaner, smaller and more nimble.

Tickle says something like that happens every 500 years - all the way back to the Exodus and Davidic monarchy, Exile, the early Christian Church; 500 years later the Fall of Rome and Gregory the Great; 500 years later the Great Schism; 500 years later Reformation; and now - this - whatever history will call it.

Two things happen with each successive Rummage Sale: the old institution gets smaller and better, and a new institution is born and both of them march into the future, each of them stronger, more nimble, responsive and faithful, than before.

I devoutly hope she is right. At the moment the mainline churches in the United States are all in the process of steady numerical decline and have been for forty years, with a consequent loss in position and influence in American culture.

Not to belabor the point, but my church, the Presbyterian Church (USA), has essentially lost half its membership from the 1960s to today: from close to 4 million to slightly more than 2 million. Something similar is occurring in every part of the family of Mainline, or Mainstream Churches: United Church of Christ, Methodist, Episcopal, American Baptist (progressive), Disciples of Christ, Lutherans - not quite as dramatic but still down. Conservative Evangelical churches at the same time, have done relatively well, led by the Southern Baptists, but even their growth seems to have stalled out. Within each denomination, a culture war rages between progressives (liberals) and conservatives and the flash point for decades had been sexuality, and the matter of ordination of gay and lesbian persons. Some denominations have seen small schisms - the Episcopalian and Lutheran for instance.

At the same time Mega-churches appeared: huge, independent congregations, ordinarily built around the personality and charisma of the organizing pastor. They are intentionally non-denominational - undenominational is more accurate - and they have eliminated the trappings, paraphernalia, liturgies and even the furniture of traditional religion. There are auditoriums rather than sanctuaries, theatre seats rather than pews, stage instead of chancel, songs instead of hymns - on a pull-down screen rather than hymnal, a praise band rather than pipe organ,

a stool, or hand-held mike instead of pulpit, and a “message” rather than a sermon. Some are quite good at what they do and faithful in their presentation of the gospel and its missional implications. Some are banal, trivial and so focused on meeting the needs of needy worshippers that the gospel - incarnation, discipleship, service, justice, giving life away - is simply not evident anywhere. There are no crosses.

There is not much evidence that people are abandoning mainline churches to join mega-churches. But there is plenty of evidence that the mega-churches, with their determinedly anti-traditional church ethos, attract folk who dropped out of church a long time ago.

Church historian Martin Marty studies and writes about what is happening, helpfully. In *The Protestant Voice in American Pluralism* he describes how the Colonial “Big Three,” Anglican, Presbyterian and Congregational thoroughly dominated during colonial, revolution and post revolution American. There were few Roman Catholics, fewer Jews and no one had ever seen a Muslim. Pluralism is what happened, slowly at first, but rapidly after immigration laws were loosened in the 1960s. Cities - where mainline churches declined and suburbanitis burgeoned and the old mainline churches were simply not nimble enough, or creative enough, to respond.

It is, for mainline Protestant churches, the post-denominational age. People are simply not coming to our churches because of the name. They used to. Presbyterians would drive by half a dozen Methodist, United Church of Christ, Baptist churches to find their way to First Presbyterian, but not much any longer. Other features attract: opportunities for youth ministry, music and the arts, quality of worship and preaching, position in the world, mission, and parking. All the church growth experts say that adequate parking is the one indispensible requirement for a viable 21st century church. We, by the way, have no parking at all at the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago.

About our loss of position in American culture. Douglas John Hall, a Reformed, Canadian theologian, says it’s a good thing. We used to dominate. Most Senators, Congressional Representatives - were members of mainline churches. When the media wanted a religious spokesperson to comment on this or that public issue, they called on the national offices of the Presbyterians or Episcopalians. The State Clerk of the Presbyterian Church was a man of such prestige that he, Eugene Carson Blake, appeared on the cover of *TIME* magazine in the 1950s. That would be unthinkable today. It has been decades since anyone inquired as to how we Presbyterians thought about anything, although we keep soldiering on, expressing our opinions on everything whether anyone is listening or not.

Hall says the mainline churches, particularly the Colonial Big Three, were virtually the "established church in a culture that was consciously Christian - Christendom, that is to say. It is gone, utterly, absolutely gone. As a cultural, political and social phenomenon, Christendom is dead and there is now an opportunity for the churches to renew themselves and live faithfully" (*The End of Christendom and the Beginning of Christianity*).

In the midst of all of that, all that social complexity and cultural upheaval (and I haven't even mentioned the culture war raging in the United States between progressives and conservatives and which has emerged within churches) general decline of mainline churches, and the advent of a new secularism - there is an anomaly - large churches that keep their names and traditions, theologically, liturgically, missionally - do quite well. Some are in the suburbs. Some are in the center of the city. I am privileged to be the Pastor of one of them – the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago. Fourth was the name chosen in the 1870s, when two smaller congregations merged, and since there was a 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 5th, 6th and 7th, but for some odd reason no Fourth, that is the name the new church proudly claimed for itself. No one ever accused Presbyterians of being overly imaginative.

My thesis is that people are attracted to Fourth Presbyterian Church because of the Reformed Tradition, although they would not have a name for it, even as I didn't when it began to compel me.

A word about the congregation. The church building is located on Michigan Avenue, the main, high-end retail shopping thoroughfare in the city and one of the most expensive and profitable avenues in the world. When the church was built in 1912-1914, none of that had happened. In fact, the site was on an unpaved road, with the shore of Lake Michigan just a few hundred feet away. The building is neo-Gothic, one of the best examples of the work of Ralph Adams Cram, the premier Gothic architect of the day - whose work included Princeton University and the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City.

Our building is a gem, a sanctuary that seats 1400, now surrounded by tall, residential high rises. The John Hancock Building - 100 stories, is directly across the street. Our neighbors include vertical shopping malls and high end hotels, The Four Seasons and Ritz Carlton. Because of the high rises, the residential population around the church is large - and growing. A little more than a mile to the west a Public Housing Project is in the process of transition. For fifty years Cabrini Green became the worst of our experiment in high rise public housing, a decaying concentration of poverty, unemployment, dysfunctional families, and crime. Both - the conspicuous affluence and commercialism of our immediate environment

and the proximity of our neighbors in Cabrini Green have, for decades, defined the church's life and outreach.

The congregation has grown in the past 25 years, from 2400 to 6200. It is a diverse congregation - more young single and young married than most churches, with lots of children and young people - many, many more than the designers ever anticipated would be there. Economically, there are business executives, doctors and attorneys and there are school teachers, nurses, and marginally employed, socially marginalized, and a few homeless people. The congregation is mostly white, but there are growing numbers of African Americans, Latinos and Asians.

I will use Cynthia Campbell's and Brian Gerrish's description of Reformed Tradition to describe how it is expressed in the life of our congregation and how, I have discovered, it remains a very lively and compelling tradition.

Our three morning worship services, 8:00, 9:30, 11:00 am (9:30 and 11:00 with full sanctuary) are traditional. Clergy wear robes, Geneva tabs - or preaching bands - and clerical collars. The liturgy is Reformed - praise and adoration, the Word read and preached, prayers of the people, offering, blessing. Traditional hymns are sung, and the church has a long tradition of excellent music, with a large pipe organ, professional singers in the choir and a brass ensemble that plays for worship once a month.

The music is good. People know what to expect and love it. No one has ever suggested we hire a praise band.

Please know how conscious I am not to seem to be bragging, or "tooting my own horn." I am privileged beyond my ability to express it. We are richly blessed with resources that the vast majority of churches do not have. It is not at all my accomplishment. I inherited it and for 25 years have tried to use it faithfully.

The music is varied: from classics to contemporary compositions and spirituals. A 4:30 pm service uses jazz as the musical idiom and is attracting new and curious people.

My preaching is guided by the lectionary - but not chained to it. For instance, this autumn, in response to the new atheism and the rash of best sellers in the U.S., making the case for atheism, Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great*, and Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, I am preaching a series of sermons on "What the Bible Says and What We Believe about God." There is nothing more tedious than a preacher talking about his or her own preaching, so I will resist the temptation except to say I read a lot and work hard at it and strive to be faithful to scripture and relevant to

what is happening in my city, nation and world. References to the economy, war in Afghanistan, the atrocious epidemic of guns and consequent deaths of children in Chicago, find their way into sermons. I try not to be partisan politically. Some people tell me I am not successful. I simply insist that what is going on outside is important inside the church, and that Karl Barth was right when he said a Christian must have an open Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other.

We value the Reformed emphasis on the life of the mind. An Academy of Faith and Life is the name for our Adult Education program, consisting of one ongoing adult Bible Study class - and literally dozens of short term classes and one-time lectures on topics as varied as The Theology of John Calvin, The Parables, Religion in Film and Art, and Islam. Several hundred people participate in one or more of these activities annually. We also hold weekly Sunday School for several hundred youngsters, a Confirmation Class for 40 8th graders this year and Junior and Senior High youth programs for study, fellowship and service and mission trips.

We strive to be ecumenical and respectful of other faith traditions.

One of the first things I did when arriving 25 years ago was call on the local Roman Catholic Archbishop, Joseph Cardinal Bernadin, and invite him to preach at Fourth Presbyterian Church. He was delighted and did it - twice - and so has his successor Francis Cardinal George. That, and community Thanksgiving Services with Holy Name Cathedral and the local Jewish synagogue provided the framework for Interfaith services at the time of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center.

Our relationship with Chicago Sinai Congregation bears mentioning. When an older synagogue decided to relocate in our neighborhood and build a new building, the Rabbi asked to see me to talk about an idea he and his leaders had. Synagogues are built to accommodate the crowds for the High Holy Days - which customarily are huge, many times larger than regular Sabbath services. So, Rabbi Berman asked, would we consider allowing Congregation Sinai to use our sanctuary for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services, which would allow them to build a synagogue more appropriate for the numbers of people who attend Sabbath services.

I wish I could tell you that our leaders responded immediately and positively. Actually, something better happened. We had a good, strong conversation about the meaning of our worship space, whether it was sacred and exactly what we meant by that, and about our Jewish neighbors, how our faith in Jesus Christ informed our stance toward theirs. Were they targets for evangelization or something more complicated than that?

Happily, we resolved the question by issuing an invitation for High Holy Day observances to be scheduled in our sanctuary. And that is what has been happening for 10 years. Every September/October on several mornings, afternoons and evenings, our building is filled, standing room only, with our Jewish neighbors who are now so accustomed to the arrangement that many of their members have staked out their favorite Presbyterian pew - just as my own people do.

It has been an altogether happy relationship - with several joint adult education seminars, and joint service projects. And it has been a symbol of something deeper and more important - a theological tradition that is open and respectful. People know about it, are grateful for it, and are compelled by it.

The events of 9/11 changed a lot in my country and culture and church. For one thing no one knew a thing about Islam. I managed to get through 4 years of undergraduate and 4 years of graduate education without Islam being mentioned other than very peripherally. Nearly ¼ of the world's population is Muslim, but my education barely acknowledged the fact. Now - people were attacking us, calling out as they crashed airplanes into skyscrapers, "Allah Akbar" - God is Great. The reaction in my country was immediate and harsh. Supported by many in the media Americans concluded that Islam had attacked us: Islam which we now believed as a violent, hateful religion. The media was full of it. The Internet made it worse. It still festers.

So we invited Islamic scholars to come and teach in our Academy for Faith and Life. I taught an early morning course on *The Battle for God*, Karen Armstrong's superb study of Islam. We invited the Council of Islamic Organizations to send a representative to read from the Koran in our community Thanksgiving Service, and we invited Muslim groups to join us for discussion, service projects and fellowship - all of which is happening. We're not only learning that Islam is not an essentially violent religion and feeling good about it: we are, I believe, expressing our theological tradition in a way that provides people with an alternative notion of what it means to be a Christian church in a pluralistic culture.

Recently, as the 9th anniversary of 9/11 approached, and as the culture war raged and deepened, anti-Islamic rhetoric increased and evolved into Islamophobia. An eccentric leader of a tiny organization in Gainesville, Florida, Dove World Outreach Center - I refuse to call it a church - announced that he and his followers would observe the 9th anniversary of 9/11 by burning copies of the Koran on Saturday, September 11. I'm not sure if you even heard about it, but literally everyone on the United States did. CNN and al Jazeera picked it up and quickly reaction in the Muslim world became predictably aggressive. General David Petraeus,

Commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan, personally called Terry Jones and told him that what he threatened to do was causing NATO, American and Afghan civilian casualties.

At our staff meeting that week, it was clear that it was an important moment and an opportunity to express who we are - contrary to the despicable image of Christianity expressed by Terry Jones. So we telephoned our friends at the Downtown Islamic Center and asked if we could be helpful. The Director explained that Eid, the last day of Ramadan, which Muslims observe with celebration and picnics, was going to fall on September 11th this year and he and all Muslims were afraid that the media would portray their Eid observance as a celebration of what happened on 9/11/01. Would we come and be present with them? So we hurriedly got a statement of support out to our Session - thanks to the marvel of email, and one of our ministers and a few members attended the Eid observance and read the statement. It was, I am told, helpful and a powerful experience.

The statement and the sermon I preached the next day are available. I told the congregation about what we had done to reach out in support of Muslim neighbors and in order to express our respect, our revulsion at the threat to burn the Koran, and our shame that somehow this was being portrayed as a Christian response to Islam I decided to read from the Koran in worship. Our people were deeply moved. It was, I hope and believe, a genuine expression of a theological tradition that is open, inclusive and respectful.

Finally our tradition shapes our missional responsibilities and outreach in the world. Within the umbrella of the Session there are 9 outreach programs, each headed by a Director and with staff support.

A Counseling Center which provides therapeutic services on a sliding fee scale to members and non-members. The Director is a PhD Psychologist and his staff includes 11 other therapists.

A Center for Life and Learning that focuses on the aging population and provides programs, field trips, seminars and special activities.

A Center for Whole Health, led by a Registered Nurse offers basic health education seminars, screenings, referrals, and basic care to members and neighbors.

A Magnet School Program collaborates with three urban elementary schools to support teachers, provide supplemental materials and provides music and dance programs for urban youngsters throughout the academic year in their schools and in a special summer program at the church.

A Preschool offers a program for 2, 3, and 4 year-old pre-kindergarten children and their families.

A Tutoring Program, our largest outreach program by far, brings together 400 urban youngsters for an hour and a half with a volunteer Tutor weekly to help with school work, social skills, and to be a caring adult presence with our most vulnerable city children.

As it turns out - our Tutoring Program is our most effective evangelism enterprise. Half of the Tutors are non-members. Typically they are young, new to the city, employed in business, the law, health care and want to make a difference. They meet their youngsters in the church building - maybe they haven't been in a church for years and at some point they make a connection between the child they have come to love and the big church that is making all this happen and the next thing you know they have attended a new member class and are standing in front of us, or kneeling for baptism and promising to be Christ's faithful disciple.

Beyond these programs, that are administered by a non-profit corporation we have formed, which allows the programs to receive corporate and public funding - we have a scholarship program to assist promising public school students, and an advocacy program which allows members an opportunity to join with other members in expressing their voice on issues of public significance - and a Mission Trip program open to members who wish to travel, to learn and serve and build houses and schools in Cuba, Honduras, Guatemala, Kenya, Mozambique, Cameroon, Colombia, Native American reservations, and New Orleans, still emerging from the devastation of Hurricane Katrina.

I think I have evidence that when the best of Reformed Tradition is expressed in the life of a congregation, when the theological tradition shapes the life of the church - the result is interesting, lively and compelling.

Brian Gerrish writes:

> "A confessional tradition is more than its creeds and confessions of faith: it includes hymns and histories, the biographies of heroes and treatises of theologians, reports and pronouncements of church assemblies, inherited forms of worship and polity, and - along with everything else - an intangible ethos that is easier to describe than to define" (p. 84).

It may not always be successful - if our only way of describing success is in terms of numbers - size of membership, number of people in worship, dollars in the budget. At my ordination, the minister at the time of the

church that gave me the Reformed Tradition delivered the charge to the pastor. I have forgotten almost every word spoken on that occasion 47 years ago, and there were a lot of them. But I remember this:

"John," he said, looking directly at me, "God has called you, not to be successful, but to be faithful."

But when it/the Reformed Tradition is expressed genuinely as one way of following the Lord Jesus Christ in the life of the church, his Body on Earth, and in the world he loved - it will be a community of people - interesting, lively, authentic and joyful.